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ABSTRACT

Prestel is an interactive videotex system which has been available to the public in the United Kingdom since the late 1970's. Recent research funded by the British Library Research and Development Department provided public libraries with access to Prestel and monitored their reactions to the services. Aims of the trial were to promote Prestel by means of demonstrations and individual use and to assess Prestel as a reference tool. Results include the findings that, in most cases, librarians were involved as intermediaries in system use, and that the most frequently requested items were from the areas of business and economics, travel, employment, current affairs, weather, and consumer information, with business and ecomonics the most popular. While the system was useful for answering reference inquiries in certain specific areas, its overall performance was marred by poor indexing and lack of depth in the available information. It is expected, however, that the increasing use of private videotex systems and electronic mail and the availability of gateways will open up exciting new possibilities in the future for libraries to broaden their range of videotex-related activities. Two references are listed. (Author/LMM)

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# VIDEOTEX IN LIBRARIES: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE BRITISH EXPERIENCE AND DIRECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Prestel is a public videotex service which has been operating in the United Kingdom since the late 1970's. Recent research into the use of Prestel in public libraries has shown that whilst the system was useful for answering reference inquiries in certain specific areas, its overall performance was marred by poor indexing and lack of depth in the available information. Looking to the future, the increasing use of private viewdata systems and the availability of gateways will open up exciting new possibilities for libraries to broaden their range of videotex-related activities.

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## INTRODUCTION

Prestel is an interactive videotex system which has been available to the public in the United Kingdom since the late 1970's. The British Library Research and Development Department recently funded research which provided a range of public libraries with access to Prestel and monitored their reactions to the service. The detailed results of this study have been reported elsewhere by Yeates (1). The purpose of this paper is to assess the major findings of the trial and to suggest ways in which libraries might use videotex systems in the future.

Throughout the rest of this paper I shall use the British term "Viewdata" to refer to interactive videotex systems such as Prestel.

## AIMS OF THE TRIAL

At the outset of the project described by Yeates only a dozen public libraries had access to Prestel. The trial enabled another thirty-six libraries to gain access to the system. After a period of staff training and familiarization, Prestel services were offered to the public and their reactions monitored.

One of the major aims of the trial was to promote Prestel by means of demonstrations and individual use. Frequent demonstrations were given to the public and as a result, Yeates estimates that approximately 50,000 people saw Prestel live in libraries during the period of the project. Actual use, however, only ran at a mean level of ten searches per week.

Another major aim of the trial was to assess Prestel as a reference tool. Thus, of the thirty-six terminals deployed, the majority were installed in central reference libraries.

## PATTERNS OF USE

The manner in which Prestel was used by the trial libraries is particularly interesting. In the majority of cases librarians suggested to their clients that

Prestel might be an appropriate reference tool to use. Then, as most clients lacked sufficient confidence to perform their own searches, staff accessed the system for them.

The involvement of librarians as intermediaries may cause some surprise, particularly in view of the fact that viewdata is meant to be sufficiently user-friendly that subscribers can access it unaided in their own homes. The ease of use of viewdata is, to a large extent, dependent upon the quality of indexing and the consistency of structure within and between databases. Both factors are determined by the overall level of editorial control exerted by the system operator.

In the case of Prestel the system operator has chosen to exercise minimal editorial control. As a result, casual users may well require the services of an intermediary who is familiar with the structure and content of the specific database of interest and who can find his or her way through the indexing structure with minimum difficulty.

Unfamiliarity with the use of viewdata is not the only factor determining user confidence levels. The manner and extent to which access to the system is controlled by library staff also has a bearing. Yeates suggests that the ideal site for a Prestel terminal should provide high public visibility yet afford some privacy, avoid disturbance of other library users, and facilitate staff supervision. In the majority of cases the terminals were located on the main reference inquiry desk without any special provision being made for user seating arrangements. Even given the fact that Prestel terminals require access to power outlets and telephone lines, it seems inexcusable that they were sited in such an unimaginative manner.

TYPES OF INQUIRY

As a publishing medium viewdata lends itself well to the delivery of certain specific types of information; for example, information that changes rapidly

in comparison with conventional publishing time-scales. Similarly, information that can be organized conveniently into fragments of approximately one-hundred words is also well suited to dissemination by viewdata.

The libraries that participated in the Prestel trials used the system as a resource in answering reference inquiries. In this particular role Prestel supplied satisfactory answers to almost half the inquiries directed to it. The most frequently requested items were from the areas of business and economics, travel, employment, current affairs, weather and consumer information. Of these areas, business and economics proved to be the most popular.

That business and economics were the most popular areas should cause no surprise, since this kind of information changes very rapidly and can be displayed concisely. In addition, the business community has been one of the major foci in the Prestel marketing strategy. Information from the other areas is of a type that can be easily tabulated or summarized and with intelligent use of color and graphics can be presented in such a way that it is readily assimilable by a general audience.

Prestel would thus appear to be particularly suited to the delivery of ready-reference information.

REACTIONS TO PRESTEL

Many first-time users approach Prestel with the belief that it is an encyclopedic resource. Reality, of course, falls short of such high expectations and it is therefore inevitable that some users are disappointed by their first encounter with the system. Despite this fact most public library users reacted favorably towards Prestel. Furthermore, many were impressed by the go-ahead nature of the libraries using this new technology.

Although impressed by the technology, many clients expressed misgivings about the information available from the system. Some users, for example, expressed frustration at having a search terminate with referral advice rather

than hard information. Others felt that the available information was too shallow. There was also a feeling that the system should provide more retrospective statistical data.

Library staff were somewhat less enthusiastic about Prestel than their clients. Yeates suggests that this may be because librarians have a good knowledge of conventional reference tools and are thus better able to compare the merits of the two types of resource. Staff criticism of Prestel centered on the lack of comprehensiveness and depth in the available information and also upon inadequate indexing.

These criticisms of Prestel highlight some of the problems that are preventing the system from fulfilling its potential as an information resource. These problems include lack of overall editorial control and poor indexing practices. The fundamental limitations of the medium itself may also restrict its widespread adoption.

One of the criticisms levelled at Prestel is the frequency with which referral advice is given instead of hard information. On more than one occasion this author has experienced the frustration of performing a lengthy search only to retrieve a telephone number at which the required information can supposedly be obtained. Similarly frustrating is the experience of having to access and scan several screenfuls of advertising copy in order to arrive at the required information; or worse, to find that the required information is not available. Both problems are symptomatic of a lack of overall editorial control.

Another cause of disappointment was the lack of depth of much of the information on Prestel. As mentioned elsewhere in this paper, viewdata delivers information in blocks of approximately one-hundred words; reading more than a few of these blocks from a television screen can be particularly tiring. Thus, viewdata may well be suited to the presentation of summaries rather than in-depth information.

Viewdata is generally regarded as being an opaque medium. That is, "when

looking at any one screenful of information, further screenfuls about to be shown, or available for searching are not apparent, unless announced by indexes." The indexes themselves are of course also limited to what can be displayed on a screen. The quality of viewdata indexes is thus of particular importance to the overall utility of the system.

Librarians and their clients were unanimous in expressing their dissatisfaction with Prestel's indexes. In fact, Prestel has gained some notoriety for poor indexing practices at both the system operator and Information Provider lives. In this author's judgement it is the responsibility of the system operator to provide an example of good practice in its own indexes so that Information Providers will be encouraged to follow suit.

On the positive side, Prestel did receive some praise from librarians and their clients. The ability of the systemto provide a large range of subject matter in one place met with wide approval. Some librarians felt that Prestel could be easier and quicker to use than other sources for certain kinds of inquiry. Others saw it as a useful tool for updating hard-copy sources. The fact that one only pays for the information one uses was also widely appreciated. However, librarians and their clients generally felt that the overall cost of using the system was too high.

NEW FACILITIES

Looking to the future, two recently introduced facilities have the potentiol of greatly expanding the power and utility of Prestel.

One of these new developments is an electronic mail facility called Mailbox. This service enables subscribers with alphanumeric keyboards to send messages to any other subscriber. The message is delivered immediately to the recipient's electronic mailbox to await collection the next time he or she logs into or out of the system. Once altered to the fact that a message is waiting, the recipient can choose to read, store, delete or ignore it.

The other important development is the Gateway Facility. Gateway allows a conventional viewdata terminal to be connected via Prestel to an external computer. The Prestel user can then access information stored in the external computer by using normal viewdata retrieval procedures. Gateway thus provides user-friendly access to existing databases at local call rates.

PRIVATE VIEWDATA SYSTEMS

The growth of Prestel (a public viewdata system) has been paralleled by a similar growth in the use of private viewdata. Private systems offer viewdata-style access to local databases through low-cost terminals linked to the telephone network. The main advantages of the system are that users are not required to learn a query language, no special data communications facilities are necessary, and the same terminals can also be used to access public viewdata.

One major application of private viewdata in libraries would be to provide increased access to local and community information. This kind of information is typified by lists of addresses of local clubs, "what's on" information, library promotional material, and lists of local doctors, dentists and councillors. Some libraries already make this type of information available through Prestel, but it is more appropriate (and more cost-effective) for it to be available through private rather than public viewdata systems. In fact, at least one library authority in the United Kingdom is already using a private viewdata service to deliver local and community information to its clients (2).

FUTURE POTENTIAL

Although private viewdata is undoubtedly of importance to libraries, it is the combination of private viewdata and Gateway that holds most promise for the future. Once it has become commonplace for private viewdata systems to be linked to the public network through Gateways, librarians will be able to use a single terminal and a single protocol to access and interact with a vast array of databases. Applications might include direct on-line ordering from publishers, interactive

interlibrary loans, and perhaps, access to the national bibliographic database.

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